

# What's in a Nominal?

## Introducing Nominalizations in College Writing Class

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### Introduction

Within the last few decades, scholarly analyses of written texts have succeeded in providing more tangible criteria for better writing (Bruce, 2008; Graff & Birkenstein, 2007; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Hyland, 2009). Overall structural features as well as lexicogrammatical elements in a variety of genres have been widely examined to gain insights into the art of writing, once thought of as an inscrutable process accessible only to those born with a pen in their hands or to those having naturally acquired the skill through their endowments. Application of these efforts to writing instructions for academic purposes has been instrumental in developing more practical teaching methods for writing in academic contexts (e.g., Gillett et al., 2009; Hinkel, 2004; Leki, 1998; Swales & Feak, 1994; Zemach & Islam, 2005).

One of the more remarkable findings applicable to writing instructions is the distinct use of nominals in academic texts (Biber, 2006; Biber & Gray, 2010; Biber et al., 2011; Colombi, 2006; Halliday, 1985; Schleppegrell & Colombi, 2002, *inter alia*). Nominalizations enable writers to package information into reified linguistic units dense with information, and thus allow them to elucidate their complex and sometimes hierarchically structured ideas in more compact forms. The language of schooling, particularly in higher education, requires this strategy of condensation (Schleppegrell, 2004). Therefore, in the teaching of academic writing, introducing this function of nominals should figure as a significant component to help students produce more dense, concise prose, an attribute highly regarded in the broad

community of academics and researchers (Parkinson & Musgrave, 2014).

Nominalizations per se have in fact been drilled to a limited degree during “grammar-heavy” English classes in secondary education in Japan (e.g., Iwakiya, 1980; Morizumi, 2013). They, however, are rarely taught in relation to their use and functions in academic texts; so, as is often the case with some other grammatical features, students are left unaware of when and where best to apply nominalizations when they compose their own texts. Hence, it seems vital and essential to teach how nominals are employed effectively in academic prose, as well as how they can be applied meaningfully in learners’ own written products, particularly at the tertiary level where students encounter lengthy nominals as common occurrences in their reading and writing tasks and assignments (Gallagher and McCabe, 2001; Sasaki, 2006; Schleppengrell, 2004).

In a one-year composition course offered for freshmen at Tsuda College, some 20 students in each class are guided to compose several paragraphs and essays. Starting with formatting and outlining ideas, the students write several developmental patterns of paragraphs ranging from simply listing ideas to comparing and contrasting alternatives, and to devising solutions to problems. Along with the composition of paragraphs of these different developmental patterns, they receive instruction in general grammar points as well as textual coherence and cohesion to strengthen the unity and logicity of their writing.

The present paper first offers a general overview of the theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics adopted in the study that understands nominalization not simply as a formal, surface-level linguistic phenomenon but as a conceptual reanalysis of the depicted scene as a “frozen” process that becomes available for more elaborate predication. It then describes a three-step approach to teaching nominalizations in a college composition class employed in the study, provides a qualitative analysis of some of the salient changes observed in the students’ writings to examine the effectiveness of the approach, and briefly discusses pedagogical implications of the study for the teaching of academic writing at the tertiary level.

## Framework of the Study:

### Nominalization in Systemic Functional Linguistics

Nominalization, known in Systemic Functional Linguistics as a type of grammatical metaphor, is an “incongruous” lexicogrammatical realization of meaning, as opposed to a normal, “congruous” linguistic manifestation of the intended meaning, most notably observable when an unfolding process is reconstrued and linguistically realized as a nominal or noun phrase, instead of as a verb phrase (Eggins, 1994; Halliday, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). It is metaphorical in the sense that the intended meaning derives from a reanalysis of the dynamic process as an abstract “thing” in a sort of grammatical realignment that involves transference from one grammatical category (i.e. verb) to another (i.e. noun). This incongruity is a salient characteristic of academic writing and requires something of a cognitive leap on the part of the learner, but it at the same time lends itself readily to expressing complex ideas in succinct manner, which is generally favored in academic registers. Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) note:

As we have seen, grammatical metaphor of the ideational kind is primarily a strategy enabling us to transform our experience of the world: the model of experience construed in the congruent mode is reconstrued in the metaphorical mode, creating a model that is further removed from our everyday experience—but which has made modern science possible (p. 646).

According to Colombi (2006), the major functions of nominalizations include: (1) removal of the agent, (2) transformation of actions into “things”, and (3) creation of “conceptual objects” for further predication. First, when the agent is removed in a nominalization, along with time specifications signaled by temporal markers, the end result of an action, rather than the actor, becomes much more prominent, thereby contributing to the objective tone of the writing at hand by “creating more distance between the event and the participants” (p. 154). In addition, when actions are turned into things, they acquire more “material” status and become available for modification, while nominalizations give rise to “conceptual objects” that can move in conceptual space as “actors in their own right” (*ibid.*).

Another core characteristic of nominalizations is that they allow writers to show causal and other relationships more explicitly and concisely by directly connecting the relevant elements within the length of a sentence, a crucial

competency for any successful academic writer (Schleppegrell, 2004, Ch. 3). This combination of explicitness and conciseness is crucial in science and other genres of academic writing because research in those fields generally seeks to identify causal relationships among multiple variables and the ability to provide lucid and succinct accounts of such causal links is essential for achieving recognition from members of their academic communities.

Taken together, these key functions of nominalizations collectively contribute to enhancing the objective, impersonal tone of writing, a feature most prominent in academic prose, and this naturally delineates nominalizations as a potentially very fruitful area of instruction for learners of academic writing, including nonnative language learners. This basic understanding of nominalizations as a rhetorical device for effective and genre-appropriate presentation of ideas for academic purposes provides theoretical and practical underpinnings for the present case study.

One final observation worth exploring here is that the idea of introducing the notion of nominalization for rhetorical purposes at the tertiary level, rather than earlier, is grounded in a growing body of research that seeks to illuminate developmental aspects of acquiring the skills to exploit knowledge of prominent characteristics of standard academic prose, including extensive use of nominalizations. Biber et al. (2011) put forth a developmental index wherein dense use of phrasal dependent structures, as in nominalizations, is identified as the last stage of a hypothesized developmental progression in learning academic writing, after such structures as finite dependent clauses functioning as constituents in other clauses. In other words, it may be more developmentally challenging to learn how to use nominalizations than other lexicogrammatical devices, and it appears to make pedagogical sense to introduce nominalizations at the college level for language learners when they also presumably face similar challenges of producing academic prose dense with information packed into extended noun phrases in courses they are taking in their native language as well. This speculation partially motivated the present case study.

## **The Case Study: A Composition Course in Tsuda College**

### **Background**

At Tsuda College, there are two compulsory one-year composition courses,

Composition 1 and 2, which fall in the general English language education category, and the current study took place in the Composition 1 course offered to freshmen. The major goal of the course is to help students develop writing skills by guiding them from basic paragraph writing to essay-length writing. The most relevant part of the lesson schedule for the first semester of the course is presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**

*Lesson Schedule for the First Semester*

Lesson	Writing Focus	Grammar & Mechanics
1	Introduction	
2	What is a paragraph?	Format
3	Topic sentence	Subject-verb agreement
4	Concluding sentence(s)	Tense
5	Supporting sentences	Prepositions
6	Methods of development	Punctuations
7	Unity and consistency	Pronouns
8	Coherence	Sentence order
9	<b>Coherence</b>	<b>Nominalization</b>
10	Theme-rheme	Word order
11	}	}

In the first semester, students write several paragraphs of a variety of developmental patterns such as listing, description, how-to, classification, comparison and contrast, and problem solving. Topics are either given by the instructor or chosen on their own, and along with writing these paragraphs, some of the key grammatical points covered in their secondary education are reviewed using their own compositions. While students become familiar with writing down their ideas in paragraphs, common grammatical and mechanical points important in college-level composition are discussed and practiced.

After about eight lessons, when students have written about six to seven paragraphs on different topics in a range of developmental patterns described above, the stress is now placed on the unity and consistency of their writing, and the vital notion of coherence is introduced (Tsuda College, 2001). Through exercises focused on correcting incoherent paragraphs by omitting unnecessary sentences or changing

the order of scrambled sentences, students begin to recognize the importance of coherence, thereby becoming better-equipped to edit their own compositions and proofread those of their peers’.

## **The Three-Step Approach**

At this point, the notion of nominalization, known to contribute to the overall coherence and unity of written products through lexical ties, is introduced in three steps within one lesson hour: (1) introduction of academic register, (2) sentence-level nominalization exercises, and (3) application of nominalizations to students’ own writings. The details of the three steps, which are partially based on Takahashi (2012), are given below:

### **(1) Introduction of academic register**

The instructor first explains to the students that there are different types of register, a central concept in Systemic Functional Linguistics that represents a “conventionalized, functional configuration of language tied to certain broad societal situations” (Lee, 2001, p. 46), including informal, conversational registers as opposed to formal written registers. What they are expected to adopt in academic writing is the kind of formal written register that is broadly accepted in the academic community as its norm, which we simply call here the “academic register”. The instructor then draws to the students’ attention that one of the distinct characteristics of the academic register contributing to the overall academic tone of a written text is the use of nominals or noun phrases, which enables the writer to present ideas in a more objective, impersonal tone with a higher degree of abstraction as is often mandated in scientific research publications (Colombi, 2006; Halliday, 2004; Schleppegrell, 2004).

### **(2) Nominalization exercises**

In the next stage, the instructor has the students work on a sheet of exercises to convert (a) a list of sentences to noun phrases, and then (b) a list of complex and compound sentences to simple sentences using nominals (see Appendix). It is a simple one-page drill with five sentence-to-noun-phrase conversion exercises and three multiple-clause exercises. The following are examples of (a) and (b), respectively:

- (a) We improved the design of .... → improvements in design
- (b) Scientists discovered how to fission atoms, and they became able to develop the atomic bomb. → The discovery of atomic fission led to the development of the atomic bomb.

Since the whole point of introducing nominalizations in this composition course is to help students learn to assume a more objective tone in their own writing with an appropriate level of concision, it is also important to provide them with a list of verbs commonly used for connecting nominal phrases to denote causal and other key conceptual relationships so that they can actually start developing and refining their ideas in more pithy language. Among those “connecting” verbs presented to the students are:

- is
- has
- lead to
- result in
- enable
- cause
- make
- contrast with
- stem from
- show

### **(3) Application of nominalization**

In this final stage, the instructor asks the students to review their latest drafts and make some appropriate changes using nominals. Here, the instructor does not specify which sentence or sentences to convert to nominals or noun phrases. In other words, students are given freedom to decide what and where to change.

### **Student Writing Samples**

Despite the limited nature of the focused instruction described above, the students' revised drafts after the nominalization lesson produced some marked occurrences of nominalizations that putatively reflect the students' raised awareness of the central role of nominals as a tool to condense ideas into more compact sentences that represent causal and other relationships more directly and

economically. The following are some of the more salient examples of such changes identified in the students' drafts before and after the focused lesson, all taken from different students' versions:

### Sample 1

Pre-treatment: We can be in touch with the culture of the country by studying a foreign language.

Post-treatment: The study of a foreign language enables us to be in touch with the culture of the country.

### Sample 2

Pre-treatment: One disadvantage of having a job while in college is that you cannot concentrate on your study. **If you work too hard, you cannot do your homework or sleep enough**, so you will waste your time.

Post-treatment: One disadvantage of having a job while in college is that you cannot concentrate on your study. **Working too hard disturbs your study at home and sleep**. As a result, you will waste your time.

### Sample 3

Pre-treatment: China insists that China has the rights over Senkaku Islands, so Japan-China relationship is tense now.

Post-treatment: China's insistence on their rights over Senkaku islands caused tension between Japan and China.

To situate the short sentences in Sample 3 in their original context for a better understanding of how the student writer actually undertook the challenge of packaging the same information in a denser and more compact configuration through the use of nominalizations, a longer stretch of the passage is also presented below from the pre- and post-treatment versions, respectively.

Pre-treatment: Japan's relationship with China has a long history, but now it has become more complex than before. On one hand, Japan's relationship with China is at a crisis point. **China insists that China has the rights over Senkaku Islands, so Japan-China relationship is tense now**. On the other hand, China and Japan are good trading partners. Many Japanese companies go to



China to produce goods, and it benefits both countries, so Japan and China should make good relationship.

Post-treatment: Japan's relationship with China has a long history, but now it has become more complex than before. On one hand, Japan's relationship with China is at a crisis point. **China's insistence on their rights over Senkaku islands caused tension between Japan and China.** On the other hand, China and Japan are good trading partners. Many Japanese companies go to China to produce goods, and it benefits both countries, so Japan and China should make good relationship.

Here, it appears clear that the use of nominalization in the bolded part helps to render the post-treatment passage more informationally dense and more authoritatively presented, in a way that conforms to the expected linguistic norm for effective academic discussion and persuasion. It is further worth noting that, in both Samples 1 and 2, the agent of the depicted process is removed in the subject noun phrase (as in "the study of a foreign language" and "working too hard") with the effect of framing the same idea more objectively and impersonally. This objectification effect was also palpable in other occurrences of nominalizations found elsewhere in the students' revised drafts.

## Discussion

Since the current study was intended as a preliminary case study to shed initial light on the pedagogical effectiveness of a short focused lesson on nominalizations in a college-level writing class, no attempt was made to quantify favorable changes in the students' revised drafts in terms of nominalization usage. As the student writing samples above illustrate, however, the short one-hour lesson did seem to have an impact on the students' lexicogrammatical choices while they were crafting and revising their drafts. This apparent efficiency of instruction is both significant and promising because college composition classes are generally conducted under rigorous time constraints with a wide array of instructional points to cover, including but not limited to organization and cultivation of ideas, development of an authorial voice, and identification of a proper target audience, as well as more

linguistically oriented concerns, such as embedding of cohesive ties in writing and awareness of rhetorical effects of various lexicogrammatical devices. If even a very short but focused lesson on the utility of nominalization as a rhetorical device can make a difference in students' written products, many writing instructors may be encouraged to devote a small portion of their class time to teaching some basic patterns of nominalization to help their students express their ideas more objectively and succinctly so that they can succeed in various academic settings.

Moreover, the purported merit of the study consists in the very idea of situating nominalizations explicitly within the realm of writing instruction, albeit to a very limited extent, to help students navigate through the thickets of technical terms and complex concepts to develop a more authoritative voice in their own writing. This reconceptualization of nominalization as an effective writing tool rather than a dry grammatical operation to memorize is hardly shared among academic writing teachers, much less practiced by them. In fact, nominalization has long been condemned as an anathema to clear, concise prose in many writing textbooks as the textual density resulting from excessive use of nominalizations can obscure meaning relationships in a text (e.g., Williams, 2006). The present case study takes issue with this simplistic conception of nominalization and instead offers support for the emerging view that students do benefit from explicit instruction in nominalizations within the broader context of learning academic writing, for their written products begin to acquire a more objective and authoritative tone appropriate for academic purposes after such treatment.

Another relevant aspect of the present study involves the issue of learnability. In the studied composition class, once the students became aware of how to convert clausal predications into noun phrases to bring their prose in closer line with the academic register commonly approved in tertiary contexts, it did not seem hard for them to apply the nominalization schema to their own writing. This relative ease with which the students used nominalizations in their own writing in English seems to illuminate another interesting research avenue that intersects with writing education in native languages (in this case, Japanese). One plausible explanation for the students' apparent facility in handling nominalizations in English is that they are at a developmental stage in their native language where they become adept at constructing informationally dense passages by dint of employing extended noun groups, similarly to richly documented patterns of (nominal) phrasal complexity

observed in written texts by native speakers of English (Biber et al., 1999). While empirical evidence for this speculation about the possible developmental link between the two languages is evidently scarce, some studies of Japanese as a foreign language do make cursory reference to complex “noun-heavy” phrasal patterns in Japanese academic texts, which may serve as anecdotal evidence for such similarities (e.g. Nitsu & Sato, 1999). This, of course, awaits further investigation.

## Conclusion

The teaching of writing is a recursive pedagogical endeavor that requires careful and constant weaving of various macro and micro concerns into learnable units in addition to helping students choose topics and reflect on their own thinking processes. While the notion of nominalization as a rhetorical device is often relegated to the periphery of such an extensive writing curriculum, the present study explored the possibility of securing a more prominent place for nominal phraseology as a source of concision through a focused three-step lesson that highlighted important rhetorical functions of nominalization. Indeed, use of extended noun phrases is one of the most salient features observed in academic and scientific texts that allows writers to construe academic knowledge in a more compact and dense manner. As Parkinson and Musgrave (2014) note, if complex noun phrases are a key characteristic of refined academic writing, then it is to the advantage of L2 learners to address this feature explicitly in college-level writing instructions. The current study represents precisely such an attempt, albeit on a rather preliminary basis, and it goes to show that even a short focused lesson on nominalizations can have an observable impact on students' written products and help them acquire a more authoritative voice in their own writing. One caveat in adopting this approach, meanwhile, is that it is advisable, if at all possible, to give intensive tutorials after students have revised their drafts to ensure that they understand the importance of striking the “happy mean” with noun phrases because excessive use of nominalizations does make the resulting texts opaque and confusing. In that sense, nominalizations may not be a panacea, but they certainly offer a useful and accessible point of entry into the world of sophisticated academic writing.

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## Appendix: Nominalization Exercise

### Exercise 1

Convert the following clauses into noun phrases. (The underlined parts should be nominalized.)

- (1) The trial was successful. \_\_\_\_\_
- (2) We evaluated the project. \_\_\_\_\_
- (3) Staff were anxious. \_\_\_\_\_
- (4) We improved the design. \_\_\_\_\_
- (5) The procedure was difficult. \_\_\_\_\_

### Exercise 2

Make the logical relationships in the following sentence **more explicit** by using nominalization.

**Q1:** We improved the design of the product, so the sales increased twice as much as last year.

**Your Answer:**

**Q2:** Staff were anxious about the result, but the president was confident about it.

**Your Answer:**

**Q3:** Scientists discovered how to fission atoms, and they became able to develop the atomic bomb.

**Your Answer:**